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ASPHODEL

BY

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Asphodel

CANTO FIRST

Oh, pause, relentless Time! nor strike the hour,
The fatal hour that shall engulf the fair
And sweet delights of years, with baleful power
To cast them forth again, dark shapes of care;
Shadows that oft shall people the still air
And haunt the childless mother's lonely ways;
For Joy's bright flowers bitter seeds oft bear,
And on the heart in absence heavier weighs
Than present pain the memory of once happy days.

Asphodel

But no! life's saddest word is said, "Farewell!"
The bleeding fibres of Dolores' heart
With anguish quiver as she hears the knell
Of peace and sweet content; and salt tears start
And hide from her dim eyes, as they depart,
Ormond and Violet; then o'er the smiling face
Of Earth a veil seems drawn; no warmth impart
To her chill breast the sun's bright beams that grace
With fadeless splendor Nature's fairest dwelling-place.

And all glad sights and pleasant sounds that reach
Her deadened senses seem to mock her woe—
The slender palm that crowns the long, low beach;
The gleaming waters' gentle ebb and flow;
The bright-hued birds like living gems that glow
'Mid the primeval forests' gloom, and make
Vocal its solitudes, as to and fro
They flit; the bloom that skirts the tangled brake;—
All, all another pang in her torn bosom wake.

For she who had shared with her this paradise,
Whose joy and grief its sunshine and its shade,
Since on its beauty first her infant eyes
Had opened, for Dolores' heart had made—
She of whom some fond memory each glade
And blooming dell, each hill and stream endears,
With her shall wander there where late they strayed
No more till thrice the slow-revolving spheres
Shall weave the mystic chain that binds the rounded years.

And Earth, indifferent to her child's despair,
Serenely bright, in cruel beauty smiles;
Content to shine with charms divinely fair,
Though none of all those glowing charms beguiles
Dolores' heart of grief, or reconciles
Her soul with joy; for joy, alas! is dead.
And in her loneliness those summer isles
A wild and dreary waste lie round her spread;
For Nature wooes in vain the heart whence peace has fled.

Asphodel

Meanwhile the little boat that bore away
Ormond and Violet had reached the proud
And stately vessel anchored in the bay,
Like some great white-winged bird that seemed, endowed
With conscious grace, against the hills, black-browed
And silent, as it stood defined; but sealed
To beauty were their senses, for with bowed
And troubled hearts their being did they yield
To sorrow, whose black veil all joyous things concealed.

But soon the freshening breeze that filled the sails,
As slowly faded from their gaze the land,
Though far it bore her from her native vales,
Where late she saw in voiceless anguish stand
The friend and guardian whose untiring hand
Had smoothed life's pathway for her tender feet,
Revived Violet's languid pulse with bland
Caressing murmurs that her senses greet
Like voices from the far-off Future, strange and sweet.

Asphodel

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For Grief's dark shape, although she enters oft
The enchanted halls of Youth and lingers there,
A guest unbidden, paralyzing soft
And gentle natures with Medusa stare,
The magic, wondrous radiance yet doth share
Shining within those portals, mild and bright,
Until her sombre features take a fair
And friendly seeming in the charmèd sight,
As some gray ruin smiles in Dawn's transfiguring light.

Swift on the waves the shades of night descend,
And on the purple splendor of the hills,
Whose outlines with the dusky ambient blend,
Then disappear. No northern twilight fills
The solemn pause 'twixt night and day and stills
To pensive rest the bosom passion-tost;
And with swift pain Violet's being thrills,
As, in the darkness and the distance lost,
Fades from her eager gaze the last faint line of coast.

Asphodel

Morning on tropic seas! Ardent the Sun
Springs from his couch beneath the eastern wave,
Shakes his bright locks, ascends his car anon;
His steeds impatient spurn the sands that pave
With amber light the ocean-roofed cave;
Their nostrils breathe forth flames; their manes on high
Are tossed; the waves their glittering hoofs that lave,
They dash in foam through the awakening sky,
Then through the Gates of Dawn, wide open, swift they fly.

And Violet the spell unconscious owns
With glad expectance Nature's balmy rest
That breaks; the hymn of joy the deep intones
An echo finds within her pensive breast;
And all her soul contains of purest, best,
The vital influence of the hour feels;
Albeit the while her kindling looks attest
The gracious power her young heart's wound that heals,
The tear unbidden starts and down her bright cheek steals.

For lo! before her fancy, pale and sad
The image rises of her earliest friend,
Whose eyes reproachful ask, "Canst thou be glad
While to my grief new joys no ease can lend?
Thy voice with Nature's symphony doth blend
While mine is mute? The flame of love that burned,
My hope and joy, in darkness hath an end,
Within my breast its ashes cold inurned;—
Alas! thine eyes look on while mine are backward turned."

And then her gentle spirit feels the sting
Of love's sweet service slighted, or undone.
Oh, could she now restore the past, and bring
Remorse, new-born, to rule the moments gone!
Too late! to late! the winds bear swiftly on
Her fate appointed to stern northern shores;
The balmy morn with the joy-giving sun
Shall still return, but all her soul adores
No dewy morning's light to her sad sight restores.

Yet on those shores no exile cold awaits
The cherished daughter of a land more fair;
The filial piety that consecrates
Her pilgrimage, shall find its guerdon there
Among her father's kindred, to whose care
Dolores yields her till her mind expand
And hardy fruit of northern culture bear;—
This fond desire the sanctifying hand
Of Death has sealed, transforming it to a command.

Loyal to Nature's bond had Ormond come
Across the waves his sacred trust to bear
Back to the haven of his northern home
And the safe shelter of his Anna's care;
But far, alas, from her whose heart despair
Now fills, as on her sick and weary sight
The rosy morning dawns, the balmy air
Her senses greets, henceforth that no delight
In dewy morn shall find, still noon, or starry night.

Swiftly the vessel glides along the waves
That bears Violet to the early home
Of him who gave her being; in his caves
Old Ocean slumbers; the resplendent dome
That canopies his majesty the beams illume,
Serenely bright, of cloudless suns by day;
By night its stars with the phosphoric foam
Mingle their light, whose fires, swift-gleaming, play
Round the auspicious keel that onward cleaves its way.

And all Violet's heart unbid went forth
In childlike love to Ormond, while the hours
He would beguile with stories of the North,
That like a bride the blossoming year with flowers
Adorns that, frail as fair, die while the showers
And suns of Autumn back to life in vain
Woo them, when Nature, from her fragrant bowers
Exiled, sees all the glory, with the wane
Of the departing year, depart, of her brief reign.

Her loyal servitors, the while, prepare
A regal banquet free to all who yield
Allegiance to her, and with garlands fair
Her courts adorn; fruits that, in store, concealed,
Ripened 'mid sheltering greenery, revealed
To view, delight the sense on every side.
And hill and valley, forest, bending field
And grove, in gold and crimson splendors dyed,
Glow with a brighter bloom than in her young reign's pride.

But brief, alas, as bright. As fulgent clouds,
Rosy and purple, from the setting sun
Their hues that borrow, in the gloom that shrouds
The horizon fade when his last rays are gone,
So all the pomp of Nature, her green throne
Abandoned, vanishes in swift decay—
Swiftest when fairest; and the saddest tone
That swells her requiem, of the joyous lay
Is but the echo that rang in her natal day.

Her sceptre yielding to the icy clasp
Of hoary Winter, rude and stern of mien,
Her blooming crown, that withers in his grasp,
And her fair vestments of embroidered green,
Descending from her throne, discrowned, a queen,
She wraps her ermine mantle, soft and white,
Around her, that no vestige may be seen
Beneath its glittering splendor of the blight
That lies upon her beauty, spoiled of every dear delight.

Then Ormond paints, when life again returns
To Nature's breast, her tender vernal bloom.
Within her veins ethereal fire burns
Again, and rising from her frozen tomb,
Swift she dispels with magic smile the gloom
That round her loyal realm erewhile had hung;
Her gracious Sire's rekindling beams consume
The icy damps that round her brow had clung,
And she, a goddess, blooms with charms forever young.

Thus does she now in glowing beauty stand,
Fair as a dream of youthful reverie born,
To greet them smiling on the distant strand
To which their eager thoughts too constant turn.
Behold! at length dawns the auspicious morn,
Serene and bright, that to Violet's dreams
Gives form and substance. Fancy's golden bourne,
A line of light along the horizon gleams,
That Fairy's magic realm to her charmed vision seems.

O Flower enchanted! whose perfumed breath
With heaven-descended charm transports the soul,
That Earth no sorrows and no terrors Death
May hold, and Happiness is life's bright goal;
The Fates themselves do bend to our control;
Fame lends to Hope's fond speech a willing ear,
Beckoning to heights serene, though storm-clouds roll
Between; her secrets to our vision clear
The Universe shall yield, even to heaven's highest sphere—

Bright Flower of Youth! alas, thou dost dissolve
And vanish into nothingness before
The Milky Way of Truth we may resolve
Into the stars to which bold Thought would soar
To people them with her creations. The vain lore
We thirsted for with ardent soul obscures the fair,
Alluring goal with doubt-born mists, that bore
The prize our eager hands would grasp. Despair,
Remorse and Death and Woe thy seeds too often bear.

* * * * *

Near and more near that distant line of light
Now draws, expanding to their eager gaze;
Till from its depths emerging to their sight
The towers of a stately city raise
To heaven their slender height. The golden haze
Of morning lies, a magic veil, around
The city's base, but dome and turret blaze
With ruddy light; while to its farthest bound
With woods of growth primeval the low coast lies crowned.

What wild emotions thrill Violet's breast,
As on her bodily vision breaks the scene
That oft had risen at Fancy's charmed behest
Before her mind in hues forever green;
Her swiftly-varying color and rapt mien
Tell Ormond all her lips refuse to say;—
He who the idol of her youth had been
Had trod with childhood's feet that hallowed clay;
There first his eyes beheld the light of earth's brief day.

Then swift her thoughts with sudden impulse flow
Back to the solitary home where waits
A mourner desolate, whose cup of woe
From the same source is filled whence emanates
The draught intoxicating that creates
For her a magic world; and vague remorse
A keener strength the grief that agitates
Her bosom lends, until with gathering force
It sweeps the barriers down that stay its headlong course.

* * * *

The tranquil beauty of a soft May eve
Had crowned the fulness of the day's content;
And mystic shadows had begun to weave
A mantle of repose for Nature, sprent
With stars pale glimmering in the firmament,
When Violet within the ancestral walls
Stood of her fathers, joy, with sorrow blent,
Stirring her pulses—'midst memorials

Time-honored of her race a stranger in their halls.

But on her troubled soul when softly fell
Caressing accents, fondly to her breast
When Anna clasped her, to the gracious spell
Her sad and weary heart that longed for rest
She yielded up. Inconstant Fancy dressed
The future in bright hues. The cloud was gone
Whose gloom Youth's natural buoyance had oppressed,
By the soft glow of Love's unrisen sun
Dispelled; and Memory resigned to Hope her throne.

The cloud was gone; alas, to be replaced
By ardors that should scorch her young life's bloom,
Its beauty turning to a barren waste—
Bright harbingers of darkness and the tomb.
Even now within the secret halls of Doom
The thunderbolt is forged whose might shall rend
Her being to its foundations, and consume
Hope's every promise; but no signs portend
The gathering storm whose wings black o'er her life impend.

“And thou, my Julian,” Ormond said to one
Who stood within the curtain's crimson shade,
“Our Violet, child of a more ardent sun,
To shield from chilling northern airs shalt aid,
That no young bud or tender leaf may fade
Of Youth's fresh garland, till her heart forget
The pain of exile by its hopes repaid.”—
Then drew him smiling to the spot where yet
In Anna's fond embrace close held stood Violet.

And Violet, turning, places in the hand
Her hand, that, with the threads of destiny,
Her life shall with another's bind—a band
Whose strength the conquering power shall defy
Of fate and death; for as her glance the eye
Of Julian meets, in her awakening heart
A flame is kindled that shall never die,
Though fate and death their mortal lives dispart,
But of her deathless being form a deathless part.

And Julian, as from Violet Ormond claims
For him the affection of a sister, gives
Kind words of greeting, while his heart proclaims
The sacred advent of a power that rives
To its centre being, yet death itself survives.
The seal to Destiny's decree is set,
Henceforward that unites their fated lives,
For in that glance two kindred souls have met
And mingled, made by Love victorious over Fate.

CANTO SECOND

Perennial spring of life's divinest joys!
Source of our dearest bliss and darkest woe!
Thy power creates, thy power, alas! destroys
Dreams that with magic, heaven-caught splendors glow.
From thy resistless, charmèd influence flow
Transports that raise the enraptured, ravished mind
To heights supernal or in depths below
Imaginable blackness plunge it. Blind
And helpless as thou art thy fetters conquerors bind.

Thou buildest upon clouds fair palaces,
Whose halls with bright creations thou dost fill,
Ethereal habitants of rosy skies,
Evoked to being at thy potent will.
Like Memnon's statue moved by cunning skill
The slumbering soul thy rising beam salutes,
Awaked by thee to rapture's sweetest thrill;
The alchemist divine whose touch transmutes
To gold, thou givest to earth of Heaven the attributes.

Yet would I not invoke thy hallowed power
Lightly our mean and sordid life to grace.
Too sacred thou, of earth celestial dower,
To find in slaves' or tyrants' homes a place;
Yet, oh, the hope that thou our stubborn race
Mayest yet regenerate let me not lose;
That thou into our instincts blind and base
Of purer light the spirit mayest transfuse,
And round our mortal state immortal joys diffuse.

Shine ever, else, celestial Love! a star
In the far heaven of the Unattained,
Sending thy beams serenely from afar,
By mists of earth's chill atmosphere unstained;
From springs exhaustless thy clear light sustained,
Life's bark o'er trackless waters safe to guide,
Until her haven of repose be gained;
Lest from thy high sphere fallen it betide
A thing of senseless matter Youth's fond dreams deride.

* * * * *

A sunny slope by hills encompassed round,
Whose summits fade into the bending sky,
With glory of primeval forests crowned,
That veil in vaporous robes their majesty;
While of the sea the waters shadowy,
Glimmer through sudden breaks in glimpses caught
Far in the hazy distance, silently
Stirring the hidden depths of slumbering thought
With fancies vague and sweet, like zephyrs perfume-fraught.

A limpid stream, now hidden among trees,
Now flashing into light, o'er amber sands,
That ceaseless bubbles of Earth's mysteries,
Of cloud-borne tidings from far tropic lands,
Of ships hope-freighted, wrecked on foreign strands,
Of Youth and Joy, of Sorrow and of Death;
(But Nature wills that whoso understands
Of grief the speech, alone interpreteth
The note discordant heard Earth's sweetest strain beneath.)

A stately dwelling crowns the green ascent,
Embowered in trees and hung with trailing vines;
Lifting its turrets to the orient,
That catch the sun's first golden beam that shines
Beyond the hills, his last when he declines;
And where the woods a wilder aspect take
At sultry noon the shadow of the pines
A still retreat for charméd reverie make,
Fresh as the gelid depths of some crystalline lake.

Asphodel

High over all the deep and liquid blue
Of heaven serenely smiles, untroubled here
By baleful mists the soul's aspiring view
That intercept, seeking her native sphere;
Soft odorous winds the tepid atmosphere
Stir gently, rocking cradled buds to dreams
Of all delights that subtly minister
To that of being—melody of streams
Or birds; of sun or star bright dew-reflected beams.

Such was the spot where Eden bloomed again
For two of mortal mould; fair as ere Death
Had cast his shadow over Earth, or Sin
Blighted her fairest bloom with poisoned breath.
Here Love now crowns them with immortal wreath,
And Nature offers her divinest draught
In sacramental pomp; on wings of Faith,
Dissolved in rapture from Love's chalice quaffed,
Their souls to realms supernal airs celestial waft.

Here the enchanted hours on noiseless wing—
Each bearing gifts of fairest bloom to lay
Before them of the lavish wealth of Spring—
Breathing sweet odors, glided swift away,
Till Summer followed in the steps of May,
Trailing her gorgeous robes upon the ground,
With flowers of every varied color gay;
Her laughing brow with blushing roses crowned,
And scattering as she passed Delights and Joys around.

And Learning brought her treasures to impart
A subtler charm to those that Nature wore;
For Julian in the magic realm of Art
Had wandered far; his mind in the world's lore
Had steeped; his inner vision, to the core
Piercing of things, discerned behind the dense
Dull mask of senseless matter that they bore,
The soul that gave them being; intense
And full his life of all life owned the influence.

Asphodel

At the clear springs his spirit had drunk deep
Of Wisdom's sacred stream; so was he strong
To do or suffer that his soul might keep
Her whiteness undefiled amid the throng
Of worldlings weak or wicked; he still clung
To boyhood's bright illusions, and his faith
Ended to witness the Empire of Wrong
Still greenly bloomed; the desolating breath
Of Time no dear hope yet, no joy, had laid in death.

Oft had his soul with noble ardor glowed,
Dilating to the measure of his trust,
From off the chains of bondage that corrode
The souls of men with strength-consuming rust,
Some link to strike, Evil some deadly thrust
To give with Truth's bright sword; so should his name
Live in men's hearts; nor in forgotten dust
Moulder, in death's divorce, his mortal frame,
But, hallowed, share the immortality of Fame.

A lofty soul that dwelt in antique mould,
Where grace and strength were blent in just degree;
An ardent spirit that might not grow cold
Or stern, but sat in bright serenity;
A mind that, self-contained, was clear and free;
A heart attuned to Nature's varied moods,
But to the accents of Humanity
Vibrating longest; amid multitudes
At home, yet not alone in voiceless solitudes.

Love's charméd hand had never touched the chords
Of being, drawing thence their sweetest tone;
Revealing to his soul in burning words
The gospel whose glad promises atone
For all of bitterness the heart hath known,
Or yet may know, until, effulgent bright,
Broke on his soul the glory of the dawn
Before whose splendor paled each lesser light
Of life's horizon, sunk into Oblivion's night.

Transfigured by its beams Violet stood,
A radiant vision of celestial mould;
The chosen priestess of the Fair and Good,
Whose advent Youth's bright dreams had oft foretold.
Imagination, borne on pinion bold
And strong to heights unseen of mortal eye,
Beyond the realm of Reason, clear and cold,
No fairer dream of mortal destiny
Had pictured than the dear and sweet reality.

Seated beneath the shade of some old oak
Oft would they watch the blue and silent sky,
Whose tranquil depths to their young bosoms spoke
Of love enduring through Infinity.
Oft would they watch the clouds that floated by,
And picture there some island where the blest,
Freed from Earth's trammels, through eternity
Might dwell; some haven of ecstatic rest
That Fancy with unfading beauty would invest.

And oft would Violet in the sweet tongue
Of her own land some antique ballad sing,
Whose cadences the forest shades among
Like echoes from another sphere would ring;
Or tones with soul-taught sweetness ravishing,
Veiled in the accents of some song-adept,
From out the depths of her own heart would spring,
That all unconscious there till now had slept,
And waking, round them both the chain of silence kept.

And many a bright creation Julian wove
From his own fancy; many an old romance
He would recount, or tale of hapless love,
With voice commoved, or pity-laden glance;
Whereat, with gently-troubled countenance,
Would Violet sigh; and thus the flame they fed
Of love, that sought such maskēd utterance;
And legends wild and fairy tales they read;
Stringing bright gems of Fancy on Truth's golden thread.

Asphodel

And thus they yielded to the subtle power
That breathed in every gale, exhaled unseen
From out the perfumed calyx of each flower,
And every tender shoot of living green;
Softly it wrapped them in the tremulous sheen
That over forest, hill and valley lay,
Transfiguring all it touched—the smile serene
Of the great Soul that animates the clay
Of earth, and rules the world with mild, benignant sway.

And as a seed draws from the soft, moist earth
Its nourishment, and hid beneath the mould,
Breaks from its shell and silently puts forth
Its tender shoots until the manifold
Powers by which its being is controlled
Impel its growth to seek the vital air,
Then dews and sunshine its young leaves unfold,
And on the senses it breaks unaware,
Of sweetness and of beauty a creation rare—

So did the flower of love its leaves expand,
Greeting the day with sudden light and bloom;
Fed by soft dews, by airs celestial fanned,
It sheds around a ravishing perfume.
Of torrid heats unconscious that consume,
Or frosts that blight, it bares its glowing heart
To the transfiguring splendors that illume
Its beauty; all things to its bloom impart
Their fairest, and become of its own life a part.

O hour supreme! when first the golden chain
Of speech unites two souls that silently
Had intertwined their being. Love's sweet pain
Is changed to rapture when this melody
Divine gives vague, mute bliss reality.
Hopes, like young birds that from their downy nest
To dare their fate, eager yet timid fly,
Grow bold when in security they rest,
And fearless plume their wings, to higher flights addressed.

And now Love's lotus-flower steeps their souls
In sweet oblivion of all life had held,
Beyond the fairy picture time unrolls
Before their charmèd gaze—a glimpse revealed
Of Heaven to mortal vision. Time can yield
In all his course no fairer, dearer hour;
In Joy's bright meteor-blaze her beams concealed,
The star of Hope has lost her useless power,
Of Sorrow's dreary night her milder light the dower.

The golden circle of Humanity
Is narrowed to themselves. For them alone
Was Earth created, joyous, fair and free,
The realm where each the other would enthrone,
Sole sovereign whose dear sway all things should own
In glad obedience—egotism sublime
Of Youth and Love, whose faith may well atone
For the cold wisdom with which hoary Time
Crowns the steep height that Age with faltering step must climb.

CANTO THIRD

The months revolving now the waning year
Had decked in fleeting splendors, and the hour
Was come whose golden sands the perfect sphere
Of Violet's happiness should round, the dower
Of Youth, Hope's fragrant, many-tinted flower
Bringing to full fruition in the ray
Serene of Love. Of winds and waves the power
Had wrought, glad tidings safely to convey
To her expectant soul on this auspicious day.

Asphodel

Here where, upraised for her the sacred veil
That hid of life the mysteries divine,
Earth's grosser fires beside the light grew pale
That burns with lustre pure before Love's shrine,
Here where her soul the sacramental wine
Of Love made strong the bitterness to taste
Unshrinking of life's cup, her heart within
Love's magic circle sheltered, now at rest,
Waits the assurance dear that makes the Future blest.

Sweet meed of sorrows past the happiness
Time holds in trust—a mother's voice to hear
Again, again her native accents; the excess
Of her new joy into a mother's ear
To pour, her resting-place the breast sincere
That sheltered infancy;—of this delight,
Supreme and sacred, with the opening year
Her bliss that shall complete, her longing sight
The assurance dear awaits before the approaching night.

Slowly the soft Autumnal twilight falls,
Breathing a pensive charm; and never yet
Were met within those gray, time-hallowed walls
A happier group than now with Violet
The lagging moments speed; and if regret,
Of loss and absence born, on life's bright sky
A tender shadow cast, 't is but that set
Far in its depths more clearly from on high
May shine the sacred fires that light our destiny.

* * * * *

Lo! at the open door a pallid face
Like that of one who bears ill tidings, chills
Each breast with sudden terrors that replace
The expectant joy, a nameless dread that kills,
And at its source the stream of life congeals;
And while the unshaped fear pales every cheek
That from the future all its brightness steals,
"What tidings bringest thou, Victor? Speak, oh speak!"
Violet's faltering accents thus the silence break.

With solemn tenderness her hand in his
The stranger took; and "Violet!" he cries,
"From all-wise Heaven our earthly suffering is;
In Heaven our truest consolation lies,
And Heaven alone the willing sacrifice
Content accepts." — "My mother, then, is dead!"
In accents faint she said; then closed her eyes
On life's too cruel aspect, as she laid,
Like some pale, storm-crushed flower, on Julian's breast her head.

"Look up, my Violet! Belovëd, wake!
Dolores lives in Heaven!" Julian cried.
And Victor, from his eyes while lightnings break—
"Dolores lives in Heaven, whence, sanctified,
This message now she sends; and ill betide
Him who would dare oppose the last command
A mother leaves her child. Let this decide
Between us."—Ormond took with faltering hand
His letter to the Dead unopened that remained,

And one in which Dolores' hand had traced
In trembling characters her last farewell,
Tender and sad, linked with a last behest,
For Violet of love and happiness the knell—
“Thy future, dear, to one who loves thee well—
Who saved thy father's honor, I confide,
Content,” she said; “so let his care dispel
Thy grief when I am gone; thy footsteps guide.
Redeem the pledge I gave; be Victor's happy bride.”

“Alas, poor Violet! Our letters, then,
Outrun by Heaven's swift message, came too late!”
Ormond exclaimed; and Anna sighed again
“Alas, poor Violet!”—As when through the gate
Of dawn the chill rays that illuminate
With gray uncertain light some wintry day,
Struggle, and through the atmosphere vibrate
Feebly, the life in Violet's heart that lay
Here quivering through her frame resumed a doubtful sway.

And slowly raising the dark-fringed lids
In brief oblivion that had veiled her brain,
Her eyes she turns around, where fate forbids
The light of joy to be relumed again,
Quenched in the darkness of a cureless pain—
A troubled glance, as when from evil dreams
The soul awakes and Reason seeks to gain
Anew her empire; while what is or seems
Joyless and cold alike the heart foreboding deems.

And as the stern and silent group she saw,
Frozen within their bosoms at its source
Grief's gentle rain, a vague and sudden awe
Mingled with her first pain, with leaden force
Her sorrow checking in its headlong course;
Then coldly calm as monumental stone,
“Why look ye thus? Than Death is aught then worse?
Yet surely this some kindly drops had drawn
From pitying eyes,” she said, in hard constrainèd tone.

Then Julian—from whose brow all trace of wrath,
Swept by the mighty wave of love away,
Had passed, like footprints on the sandy path
That borders ocean, with resistless sway
When the full tide sweeps in—the blinding ray
Shut from his vision that lit up the abyss
Of yawning darkness that before him lay,
And pressing to Violet's brow his lips—“Let this
Attest a higher bond to Heaven, Love's hallowing kiss.

“And if from thence Dolores' spirit, freed
From the gross darkness of our mortal state,
Beholds us now, the doom her love decreed
Knowledge that beams celestial animate
Revokes; and if, in their serene estate
The angels weep, she weeps that men aside
Should set Truth's higher law, with obstinate
Dull vision turning from her prospects wide
And fair, their steps by false and wandering lights to guide.”

“Nay,” Victor, pale with ire suppressed, replied,
“This knot no shaft from Fancy’s quiver drawn,
But the sharp sword of Justice shall divide.”
Then, pausing, turned to Violet: “Hope has grown
Too strong within my breast to yield her throne
Passive,” he said, “to Fate’s first cruel shock.
Oh, at thy heart of days forever gone
Let the sad ghosts with trembling fingers knock,
Potent the sealēd fount of Memory to unlock.”

Then on her soul first broke the fatal truth
That flashed, a flaming sword, before the gates
Of the lost Eden of her blighted youth;
And as one shipwrecked, while hope animates
Shrinks from his fate, but calmly death awaits
When from his grasp the waves have swept away
His frail support, so, in the ice-bound straits,
Now, of Despair, bereft of her last stay,
To their wild waves she yields her heart a passive prey.

And pale and calm, like some fair, fragile flower
Touched by the first rude frost, she gently said,
"Alas! by her who brings for her chief dower
Remorse and cureless grief, is ill repaid
A husband's love. Oh, seek not to invade,
Victor, the sanctuary of my woe;
Within that sacred, joy-dispelling shade
Let the dark waters of my being flow,
Untroubled their brief course by Passion's mocking glow.

"And thou, Belovēd, grieve not that so soon
The cherished flower that bloomed upon thy breast
Has withered, ere the splendors of life's noon
Could light, or evening gild its placid rest.
Our Father, knowing all, knows what is best,
And loving, wounds us not with needless pain.
Yet, oh, to enter on that solemn quest
Alone, without thy strong clasp to sustain—
Fain would my shrinking soul refuse this cup to drain."

“Oh yield not, Violet, to grief’s dark spell
Thy spirit,” Ormond cried, “the passive thrall;
Nor bid to hope and happiness farewell
That thou thus early sharest a natural
And common sorrow. Time, that covers all
Unsightly ruins that his hand has made
With budding leaves and blossoms, shall recall
Hope’s vital sap thy being to pervade,
And Joy’s bright sun dispel of this dark cloud the shade.”

“And, oh, the affection here that would replace
Hers that in Heaven shall watch o’er thee still,”
Said Anna, folding her in fond embrace,
“Reject not. With a child’s dear cares, oh, fill
Our childless days till, this dark cloud of ill
Dispersed, life’s sun shine forth serene and bright.
Child of our love! our Violet! distil
Thy sweets and shed around thy heaven-caught light
In our life’s garden still, source of our best delight.”

“Enough,” said Victor; “it were idle now,
While Grief’s dark shade on spirit and on mind
Lies cold, a claim the heart would disallow
To press. Let Nature, ever wise and kind,
The icy fetters Violet’s soul that bind
Loosen with gentle hand, and time restore
All things with power benignant their defined
And just proportions; then let Reason soar
Untrammelled to Truth’s cloudless heights. I ask no more.”

* * * * *

And thus the fabric Youth and Love had raised,
A fair Aladdin’s palace, from whose bright
And countless windows joy’s clear beams had blazed,
Silent and swift had vanished in the night.
And when the cheerful morning’s rosy light
Dispelled the shadows over earth that lay,
The spot where late that Palace of Delight
Had stood, the brightness of her kindling ray
Disclosed, a scene of desolation, bare and gray.

Not with the seeming death that winter brings
To Nature's gay activity and bloom—
The kindly sleep whence life awakening springs
To fairer colors and more sweet perfume.
Beyond the gloomy portals of the tomb
The blighted flower of love may blossom now
Alone. Its sacred radiance shall illume
The garland crowning an immortal brow,
But mortal springs no more with charms divine endow.

And as a child, whose eager mind essays
The task too hard for his weak powers in vain,
At last shuts up the book, and, tired, lays
Aside the problem that perplexed his brain,
So Violet, weary, sought not to sustain
The unequal struggle, but at once aside
With life's dark problem cast life's joy and pain,
In the still darkness of the grave to hide
The ruins of the Dream love's light had glorified.

Gently her gentle spirit sank to rest;
No vain complaints or unavailing tears
Disturbed the hours that Youth would fain contest
With Death; and if at times some natural fears
Oppressed her soul, for all the golden years
Unlived, some fond regrets, these shadows soon,
Touched by the glory from celestial spheres
That lit the darkness of the dread Unknown,
Vanished like morning mists before the radiant noon.

One cloud alone hung ever, dark and chill,
Above the horizon of Earth's fading sky;
A cloud that there should rest immutable,
Till from her mortal sight it passed for aye,
Lost in the darkness of Eternity,
Or by its awful splendors swift dispelled,—
The shadow of the silent agony
That preyed on Julian's soul and thence compelled
To one dull sense of pain each fibre being held.

From all the natural joys of youth withdrawn,
As thus he saw her slowly, day by day,
Fade like a star in some sad wintry dawn,
Within his breast the feebly flickering ray
Of Hope's pale torch went out; in dread array
Before his soul stern images of gloom
Arose—that form companion of the clay
Where Grace and Beauty dwelt in breathing bloom;
In all its horrors clothed the dark and silent tomb.

Wildly he prayed to Heaven some aid to lend,
Some saving help in this his bitter need;
Alas! the high designs of Heaven bend
Not to our low estate; and once decreed,
Our fates to their appointed end proceed.
The vision of our dull mortality
Is all too narrow the wide plans to read
That guide our being; in blind agony
The bruised heart can but shrink from pain with helpless cry.

* * * * *

The shadows closing round the cheerless day
Were deepening now, and whirling on the blast,
The last dead leaves, torn from the boughs away,
Were borne, the spectres of a vanished Past.
The sky with gathering darkness overcast
Hung over Nature's lifeless form, a pall;
And sad as wailings of lost souls outcast
From Heaven for aye, the winds released from thrall
Swept through the solemn pines, her dirge funereal.

How changed the scene! How changed, alas! her heart,
As Violet took of life her last farewell;
Each wildwood sound that once had formed a part
Of Nature's joyous pæan, to the knell
Turned of dead hopes, and broke the magic spell
That erst the grassy hillside, daisy-grown,
Had changed to enchanted meads of asphodel.
Blighted by frosts no sun-ray could dispel,
The brief, bright summer of her love was done,
Ere yet the fleeting bloom that saw its birth was gone.

“Come near, Belovëd; let us once again
Together watch the sun sink to his rest;
But not, alas! in promise bright, as when
Earth smiled upon us in gay beauty drest,”
She softly said, as faintly from the west
Through gathering shadows broke a pallid gleam
And lit her couch. “When the sun’s rays invest
Nature in day’s returning light, his beam
Shall waken thee alone from our enchanted Dream.

“Take in thy dear hand mine, that I may feel
The strong support of love in this last hour;
So gently o’er my mortal sense shall steal,
Robbed of its bitterness, the conquering power
Of death; as to some fragile tropic flower
Decay comes softly, under tropic skies
That smile on it. My spirit shall not cower,
Thus while I gaze in thy belovëd eyes,
But to the Throne of Love, made strong by love, shall rise.”

O, bitter anguish! helpless thus to see,
Silent and pitiless, the hand of Fate
Place on that form its seal that blindly we
Have held to Love's dear service dedicate;
To hear that voice for the last time vibrate
Without whose tones were discord heavenly choirs;
The last responsive glance of eyes to wait
That lit our world with joy-enkindling fires;
To see, and stretch no hand, while our life's life expires.

“Dost thou remember that enchanted eve
When first we met, Belovëd; when, our hands
Uniting, Ormond bade thee to receive
To thy regard a child of sunnier lands,
Born by the wind of Fate to northern strands,
And from rude airs to shield her for his sake?
Alas! the flower that from its native sands
Transplanted, sudden tempests overtake,
Uprooted, no warm sun to life can reawake.

“And yet—though cold annihilation claim
This fragile vesture of mortality,
It cannot quench the pure, celestial flame
That lights the shadows of eternity.
Yes! that within me which can never die
I feel; and deep enshrinéd in my soul
Our love, earth’s fairest gift, I bear on high;
Could I more richly freighted reach life’s goal,
Though still some few brief years of earth should o’er me roll?

“And thou, dear friend, those few brief years shalt pass
Not all unhappy, though thy Violet
Speak to thy heart but through the tangled grass
Above her grave with dews of heaven wet;
For in thy soul shall live, an amulet
To keep it strong, the memory of our love;
Until to hope transformed, in heaven set,
A star serene, it draw thy gaze above,
And thy upsoaring soul her destiny approve.

“Yes, soaring up from Grief’s consuming fire,
True to herself thy soul shall plume her wings,
And to the clear, untroubled heights aspire
Where living waters flow from deathless springs.
And oh! when Heaven wide her portal flings
To greet thee, victor in the appointed strife,
How poor shall seem unwilling offerings,
Laid on the altar of Eternal Life,
Of Earth’s frail flowers fed by sunshine pale and brief.

“Now closer round me draws the gathering gloom;
Farewell, O Earth! where still the dearest part
I leave of my divided life. Illume,
O Sun Serene! the dark waves that dispart
Our being, with thy beams, that my faint heart,
Touched by their glory, on her homeward way
Courageous may set out. Behold! athwart
The darkness breaks the first resplendent ray
Of light celestial, herald of Eternal Day!”

And thus her spirit passed from earth's cold sphere,
Of too ethereal mould to linger long,
Chilled by the mists of our bleak atmosphere,
The strife and sorrows of our world among.
Like the last strains of some sweet, pensive song
It passed away; and in the hearts where fell
Its dying sweetness, Memory shall prolong,
Until celestial harmonies dispel
All sadness, the sad echoes of her last farewell.

CANTO FOURTH

Again to earth descending from the skies,
Bringing sweet airs to weary mortals, Spring,
Ethereal goddess, bade the force that lies,
Waiting her coming, in each living thing,
To wake refreshed from torpid slumbering,
And every fibre stir with subtle power;
That to each cell the elements might bring
Its tribute each, at the auspicious hour
Unseen to mould, combining, leaf and fruit and flower.

And swiftly wrought her busy ministers
Earth to adorn for her brief holiday;
But chief her fairest daughter, Hope, transfers
A grace divine to our inert, dull clay;
For where of her clear eyes the enkindling ray
Resplendent falls a more than mortal bloom
Each opening bud and tender leaf display;
And flowers still sleeping in the seed perfume
Mild days that coming suns with warmer light illume.

In this sweet season of awakening life,
A tired wanderer, Julian stood again
Upon his natal soil. The inward strife
Whose wasting fires at healing springs in vain
He had sought to quench, still held relentless reign
Within his bosom, odorless and sere
Making life's bloom; still wan and hollow-eyed Pain
Walked by his side, the silent minister
Of each returning day for many a weary year.

Again he looked upon the tranquil scene
Where first his soul beneath the glowing rays
Of love had blossomed. Now as then serene
And softly bright to his life-weary gaze
Nature her fresh unsullied charms displays,
And perfumed airs breathe round his languid brow;
Alas! no sun can brighten heavy days
Darkened by grief; and Heaven shall endow
With her best gifts in vain the lightning-scathëd bough.

Not his the grief that seeks in outward things
Some brief forgetfulness of pain, or finds
In transient joys some respite. Time that brings
Balm to the bruised heart, and gently binds
Its bleeding wounds, while round the soul he winds
The mantle of oblivion, to him
Such solace brings alone as still reminds
His spirit of her loss, and from the dim
Long vista of the Past casts a reflected gleam.

Asphodel

In vain through many a land to which his soul
In Youth's fond dreams with ardent longing turned,
Restless he wandered. Vainly to the goal
Where Fame's bright star with living lustre burned
His course he kept; his heart alas! had learned
The lore that turns life's magic-tinted sky
To hueless space; and in his heart inurned
The ashes of Love's blighted flower lie,
His sole remaining wealth of Youth's rich argosy.

And as the bright, joy-giving sunlight falls
In darkened splendor through the antique panes
That light some dim cathedral, whose gray walls
With grave and sombre imagery it stains,
So to his soul the light life still retains,
Passing through darkened windows, takes a cold
And solemn hue that over all things reigns,
And coloring life's aspects manifold,
Hope's sun-loved flower forbids its petals to unfold.

Yet from life's bitter conflict he had come,
Though faint and wounded, victor at the last;
Nor unrewarded, though of earthly bloom
Fate on his languid brow no wreath has placed.
As one who sees before him lie a waste
Of desert sands, beyond whose arid bound
Green trees uprise with branches interlaced
That make refreshing shade upon the ground,
So did his soul discern afar heights verdure-crowned.

Celestial heights, 'mid whose unfading bloom,
Life's narrow desert crossed, at last his soul,
Approved, her glorious birthright shall assume,
The crown and guerdon of life's well-won goal;
And through his being distant echoes roll
Of harmonies divine, that upward draw
His spirit from the withering control
Of earth's corroding cares, that restless gnaw
The heart that shrinks in vain from Heaven's unchanging law.

No weak indulgence of a selfish grief
Had loosed his soul from Nature's deathless bond;
Still as in Youth's fresh season, bright and brief,
A chord vibrated there that could respond
To hopes that lay his narrowed sphere beyond;
Though lopped the fairest branch from life's green tree,
And with it blighted in the bud each fond
And joyous hope, through boughs the sap flowed free
That drew their bloom from roots cast in Humanity.

And still, a living Presence, though unseen,
Real as when to animated clay
She lent the lustre of a light serene,
Beside him Violet walked on his lone way—
A fadeless beam from Heaven's eternal day
That pierced the darkness of Earth's starless night,
The black abyss illumining where lay
In wait Despair, with clear and constant light—
Pledge and assurance dear of being infinite.

* * * * *

Below the horizon sunk the sun now sent
His parting beams that, fairer, he unseen,
And softer than his noonday radiance, lent
A glow of transient glory to the scene.
So, when Love's sun has set, his beams serene
Ofttimes, before they fade, illume life's sky
With radiance fairer than the light had been
That poured at noon its splendors from on high,
Till night and darkness close round hues that mock the eye.

And one by one in Heaven's spacious court
Each its appointed place the silent stars
Taking, assembled, glittering cohort
That with the Regent Moon her glory shares.
All nature now a tranquil aspect wears,
That wooes the weary heart awhile to rest;
And over Violet's grave blow tepid airs,
Sweet with the breath of blossoms that invest
With bloom this spot where Peace now dwells, a friendly guest.

Here Julian watched the gathering shadows close
Round Earth, for him to be dispelled no more;
At last his troubled soul shall find repose,
And Death, that took, his treasure shall restore.
Soon shall his bark from Life's receding shore
To realms of endless day her swift course bend;
So on the ear of Night his heart shall pour
Her last lament, whose echoes shall transcend
Our mortal sphere and to the steadfast stars ascend:

“O sacred fire of Youth! whose light divine
O'er life's horizon cast a living glow,
Wherein, transfigured, common things did shine,
And tears in falling changed to Hope's bright bow;
While clouds with presage black of coming woe,
Touched by the splendor of thy magic beams,
Seemed but the gorgeous drapery spread below
The Future, pictured in our ardent dreams,
Quenched in the night of years one star thy loss redeems.

“For in my barren life all else is dark
Save one bright memory of vanished years;
This sole possession Youth’s rich-freighted bark
Has saved amid the wreck of hopes, and fears
Dearer than hopes, as Night’s cool silent tears
To drooping buds are dearer than the heat
Of noon; and now this memory my spirit cheers
With such companionship as well might cheat
The heart of grief; so, still, may vanished joys be sweet.

“And in the silence of the solemn night
The echoes of a voice forever stilled
Thrill my worn bosom with a wild delight—
The vague expectance of hopes unfulfilled;
And once again my empty life is filled
With smiling images of promised joys,
Till by the dawn’s pale light untimely chilled
In space they vanish, and the world’s rude noise
My brief, illusive happiness again destroys.

“ Yet would I fain evoke from out the Past
Once more the shadows of Youth’s vanished hours.
Retrace, O Time! thy steps and let me cast
A nearer glance on Love’s forsaken bowers;
Restore me, oh! restore life’s springtime flowers;
Though their young bloom be withered yet warm rain,
From quenchless sources fed, in quickening showers
Shall fall on them till they revive again,
And with their living fragrance soothe life’s cureless pain.

“ Mysterious stars! that from heaven’s azure dome
Seem to watch over us, like angel eyes—
The beacon-lights of our eternal home—
If ye the secrets of the silent skies
Do hold that mock our vain philosophies,
Reveal, reveal unto my listening soul
The living word wherein all wisdom lies;
Oh! free my spirit from the base control
Of earth-born mists that hide from it its aim and goal.

“Do I not know that she I mourn as dead
Lives in immortal youth, forever blest?
Forever healed the wounds that here had bled,
The strife and fever of her soul at rest?
Oh! wherefore then this unavailing quest
After some nearer knowledge of her state;
Though now my heart, like a forsaken nest,
Sees Spring’s return, yet still is desolate,
A Spring unfading blooms beyond the Eternal Gate.

“My Violet! ’t was in the springtime first,
The time of budding hopes and balmy airs,
That thy effulgent beauty on me burst,
Dimmed by no shadow of approaching cares;
Alas! the smiling aspect Fortune wears
Too oft is like the calm of tropic seas
That lulls the bark their storm-fraught bosom bears
To false security, till darkening skies
Announce its doom; so Fate wrecked our young destinies.

“But 'mid the wreck and ruin of our lives,
Still fresh and fragrant as when life was young,
The sacred treasure of our love survives,
Immortal as the soul from which it sprung;
Here Fortune powerless her shafts hath flung;
As when the Sun majestic moves on high,
Tempests arise, the sky with clouds are hung
That veil his light, serene he journeys by,
His home remote from storms that trouble mortal eye.

“So thus serene the image of our love
Now beckons me from earthly griefs away;
My soul exultant feels her pinions move,
Eager to break from her frail shell of clay.
Now, now at length dawns the Eternal Day;
Smiling around me hover phantoms bright.—
I come! I come! Ye point to me the way
Where waits my Violet; on waves of light
Upborne I float dissolved in exquisite delight.”

Thus on the night expired in accents faint
His voice, to fall no more on mortal ear;
No more of love the unavailing plaint,
Of Joy or Grief the speech to utter here;
And o'er the grave shall many a pitying tear
Of lovers fall where take their peaceful rest
Julian and Violet; while each new year
With fragrant honors shall the spot invest
Sacred henceforth to Love, Life's deathless bond confest.



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